Jensen, An-Magritt

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Children's Welfare in European Countries

Beiträge

Rezension/Book Review

Aus der Profession/Inside the Profession

An-Magritt Jensen

Children's Welfare – Ageing Europe

Wohlstand der Kinder – im alternden Europa

The international researcher network COST Action 19 "Children's Welfare" took the impact of broad social changes on childhood as its starting point. Major challenges to children's welfare include the demographic development, which within a few decades may render children a numerically smaller group than the elderly; a multiplicity of new family types; and a new precariousness of the welfare state under the growing influence of the market. COST Action 19 has highlighted generation as the analytical perspective, in which children are supposed, as a group, to have something in common, which at the same time makes childhood different from other generational categories.
This article is based upon a set of country reports from this network where the following aspects of children's welfare are highlighted: ageing societies, children's market dependency, their access to public space and the emergence of the virtual child, and discourses of childhood.
Keywords: childhood, development of birth rate, different European childhoods, children's material situation

Das internationale Netzwerk COST Aktion 19 "Children's Welfare" ging von der Frage nach den Auswirkungen weitreichender sozialer Veränderungen auf die Verhältnisse der Kindheit aus. Als besondere Herausforderungen für die Wohlfahrt der Kinder wurden die demografischen Entwicklungen – Kinder werden vermutlich in wenigen Jahren eine zahlenmäßig kleinere Gruppe sein als die Alten – betrachtet sowie die neue Bedrängnis, in die der Wohlfahrtsstaat durch wachsenden Einfluss des Markts gerät. Die COST Aktion 19 hat das Generationenverhältnis zu seiner analytischen Perspektive gemacht; es wurde also davon ausgegangen, dass Kindern als gesellschaftlicher Gruppe etwas gemeinsam ist, das sie von Angehörigen anderer Generationen unterscheidet.
Dieser Artikel beruht auf der Serie von Länderberichten, die erstellt wurden. Im Zentrum des Artikels stehen folgende Aspekte: die demografische Alterung der Gesellschaften, die Marktabhängigkeit der Kinder, ihr Zugang zu öffentlichen Räumen und die zunehmende Bedeutung virtueller Räume sowie Diskurse über Kindheit.
Schlüsselwörter: Kindheit, Geburtenentwicklung, unterschiedliche Kindheiten in Europa, materielle Situation von Kindern

1. Introduction

The international researcher network COST Action 19 "Children's Welfare" took the ageing European societies as its starting point. It posed the question of how this broad social change, the shrinkage of the number of children and the expansion of the number of old people, might affect children's welfare. Other social changes such as changing economy, neo-liberalism, globalization, blurring boundaries, flexibilization and the impact of new cultural ideas and discourses impact childhood in ways which are interrelated with ageing societies. Our aim was to widen our understanding of childhood in a generational per-

spective. Will ageing populations along with other structural changes put larger pressure on the public purse at the cost of the resources available to children? Do children's material and social welfare, and time and space, relate to ageing societies? Are discourses over children coloured by their diminishing share of the population, or their use of time and spatial distribution?

The impact of ageing populations does not necessarily work through direct links. It may also operate in tandem with other social changes, such as an increase in maternal employment and new family patterns. The ambition of the European research network was to connect the overall issues involved in ageing societies with children's welfare.

The rationale for COST Action 19 Children's Welfare is described in the "Memorandum of Understanding". Here the objective of producing country reports was stated, and the work started with the outset of the action (in 2001). The reports should be based on chosen topics of changing childhood and was published as *Children's Welfare in Ageing Europe* (Jensen et al., 2004).[1] This article draws upon the experiences of these reports.

The COST-system finance networks, but no monetary support is given to research (data collections, research time, and -assistance). Therefore the network needed to rely on existing studies and national data and as such was bound to reflect the country specific conditions of childhood. Clearly available information would vary, as would methods of data collection and definitions (including children's age limits). We searched for sufficient similarity of facts (phenomena) and a certain dissimilarity of situations (contexts) to make comparisons meaningful (following Marc Bloch, in Jensen & Qvortrup, 2004, p. 814). This implies a broad approach to the task. First, data (on facts) in each country differs widely. Secondly, the countries covered a wide variety of political, cultural and economic contexts. We tried to turn this into our advantage.

The network on children's welfare was informed by the 'new social study of childhood', as described in the introduction to and summary of the country reports (Jensen, 2004; Jensen and Qvortrup, 2004). The objective was to search for general conditions of childhood, rather than exploring the complexity of variations in welfare between children. Attention should be given to how social changes affect childhood in general. Issues on vulnerable children in particular situations (child battering and sexual abuse, poor health, immigration) important as they are, should here be discussed as elements of changes in childhood. A generational perspective should guide our way of analysing social change. Do children experience – as a population group – life conditions which are distinct from other population groups, such as adults and elderly people? Scientifically, emphasis was given to identify research with children as the unit of analysis, in statistical data, national surveys and research on children's everyday life. Prominence should be given to identify research on children's life conditions here and now. Children should not only be seen as human becomings their life conditions while small (as human beings) has a worth of its own. Research on children as future citizens was down tuned while research

1 The separate country reports are available on net (see references).

on children's welfare while small was given prominence. Scientific approaches to include agency and structure, micro and macro, and qualitative as well as quantitative research were encouraged.

We searched for common childhood conditions and used the national contexts as a source for widening our understanding of mechanisms of social change. Can we, by any reasonable standard, argue that a European childhood surfaces from the multitudes of variation in country specific childhoods? We identified several aspects and inspired by the Italian report (Conti & Sgritta, 2004) we named this a 'childhood mosaic' (Jensen & Qvortrup, 2004). In this mosaic we strived to identify common features (mosaic pieces) while the patterns within each piece were coloured by the complexities of the different contexts. Many nuances are given to this mosaic and participants were encouraged to provide the national colouring to the reports. Some of the nuances given are country specific. But in many cases, during discussions in our meetings, we found nuances from one country to be relevant to several, even where it is not reported. As social researchers we are also subjected to the cultural 'blindness' of what we do not see because it is taken for granted. Through reading other reports, and discussing them at the meetings, we realized that the "taken-for-grantedness" differs. The general learning from the collection of reports includes concepts and perspectives on childhood conditions that did not necessarily surface in each report.

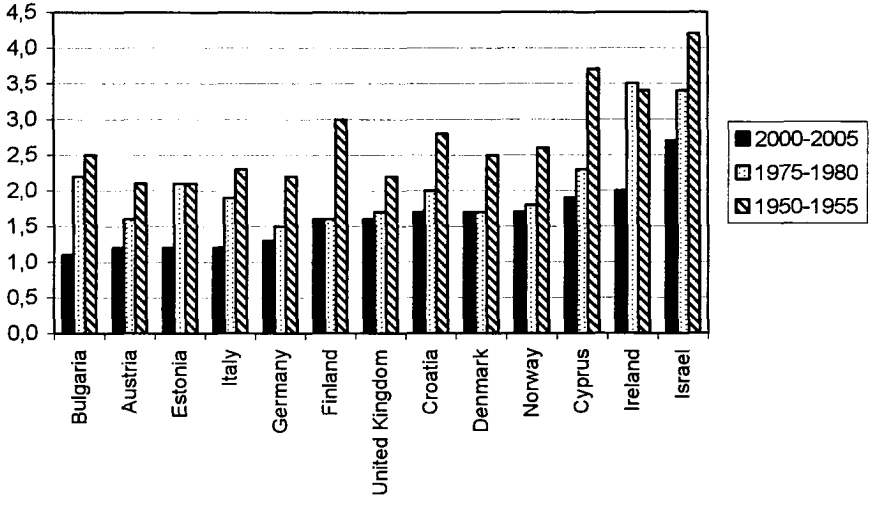
The countries included in the COST A19 network are characterized by varying economic, political and cultural situations. Some countries are in a difficult economic position with widespread poverty (such as Bulgaria, Estonia and Croatia). Some countries have recently – and are still enduring – complicated political situations like war and transition periods – or both (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Israel). Some countries have a social situation where children's welfare rests on the family (Italy, the UK), while in other countries the state is more willing to share this responsibility (the Nordic countries). The two volumes country reports include countries across the North – South and East – West divides of Europe.

What kind of mosaic emerged from the country reports? We found that despite broad variations, all countries report that the childhood population is declining, that children's economic welfare depends on their parent's market input, and that children increasingly use their time in the virtual space. Each piece in this 'mosaic' is comprised by the different country-specific conditions. The countries differ in their steps, but they are on the same track. This article explores common features of European childhood, through the three pieces of the childhood mosaic.

2. Ageing societies

The COST Action 19 includes countries where different demographic features prevail. But they all have one feature in common: over the last 50 years fertility has declined and societies are ageing. Figure 1 illustrates this development for the countries involved.

Figure 1: Total fertility rates among COST A19-countries, sorted from the lowest value in 2000



Source: World Population Ageing, UN, 2002

Without exceptions, fertility of 2000 is much lower than in 1950 and is presently lowest in Bulgaria. The fertility decline takes different pace and magnitudes. Most countries had the decline mainly in the first decades after 1950 (typically countries in the northern Europe), others in the last two decades (such as Bulgaria, Estonia and Ireland). Some countries have had a more even and gradual decline since 1950 (Austria, Israel and Italy). The Bulgarian report employs the term "a demographic collapse" to describe the situation of this country (Raycheva et al., 2004). The total fertility rate was down to 1.1 by 2002. Over 15 years period (from 1985 to 2001) the proportion of households without children under 16 increased from 60 to 70 per cent, while the proportion with two children sank from 18 to 10 per cent (p. 477). These 15 years is also the period of transition from socialism to market economy in Bulgaria and is explained in the report by the harsh reality the country faced with this change. Unlike most countries, fertility in Denmark and Norway has been rising over the last decade and the fertility levels are – in the European context – among the highest.

A fertility decline does not necessarily mean that children grow up without siblings. Most children grow up with. At the same time, a growing proportion of young people remain childless. As stated in the Finnish report (Alanen et al., 2004), children's access to siblings depend on the distribution of births. If the birth-giving group of women is concentrated among fewer women the number of siblings may remain stable even when fertility in the population at large declines. In the case of Finland childlessness is rising, 25 per cent of the women have no children at age 35.

German children may illustrate the enduring pattern of children growing up with siblings, on the one hand, and a widening gap between those entering and those abstaining from parenthood on the other (Jurczyk et al., 2004). Only 16

per cent of the German children have no siblings while almost 30 per cent of all women in western Germany are estimated to remain childless. Among women with high education the percentage is more than 40.[2]

In Denmark, where four out of five children live with siblings, the proportion of single children is decreasing (Kampmann & Nielsen, 2004). Also in Norway the proportion of children with no siblings has decreased over the last decades (18 per cent in 2002), while childlessness remains at a modest level (13 per cent of the women have no children at age 40) (Jensen et al., 2004b).

Fertility decisions are not always clear-cut. In a population a growing share of young people may decide not to enter parenthood. However, often childlessness is a result of a stepwise decision of wanting a child, but later. In all countries the birth of a first child is now postponed. This aspect is explored in the Italian report (Conti & Sgritta, 2004), but shared among countries. Young people have problems in entering the labour market at the same time as the obligations of parenthood are perceived as a big burden. With postponement fewer children are born in the end since – on average – problems in conceiving a child rises in higher ages. Some remain childless by their own choices and some are trapped by life circumstances. In any case postponement of a first child implies a larger part of the population in a childless lifestyle, adding to the growing share living without a child in their everyday life and maybe a reduced preparedness to have children around.

The fertility decline takes place as a result of many forces. The mentioned mechanisms are prominent in describing this development: more young people postpone parenthood; we see a reduction in the number of children in the family; and more people end up as childless. But a general fertility decline does not necessarily mean that children grow up without siblings.

In several countries a polarization between young people who become parents and those who do not is at play. All countries show a declining tendency for larger crowds of children in the family. A two-child norm is prevalent among those entering parenthood. However, the proportion of young people taking the step towards parenthood varies among countries.

The fertility decline has taken place in all countries in the process of modernization. It is part of the secularization and represent a non-country specific trend. But the pace and levels of this decline is country specific are given various explanations. Some blame war or economic and political upheaval – like the transition from socialism to market oriented societies. Others point to the increase in prosperity among people, which may motivate them to seek gains in the labour market rather than in the family. Others again indicate that the explanation is found in the gender- or welfare systems. But for whatever reason, in all countries women give birth to fewer children than fifty years ago. The decline in fertility has taken place in combination with an increase in longevity. The two processes have resulted in a shift in the age structure, from young to older age groups.

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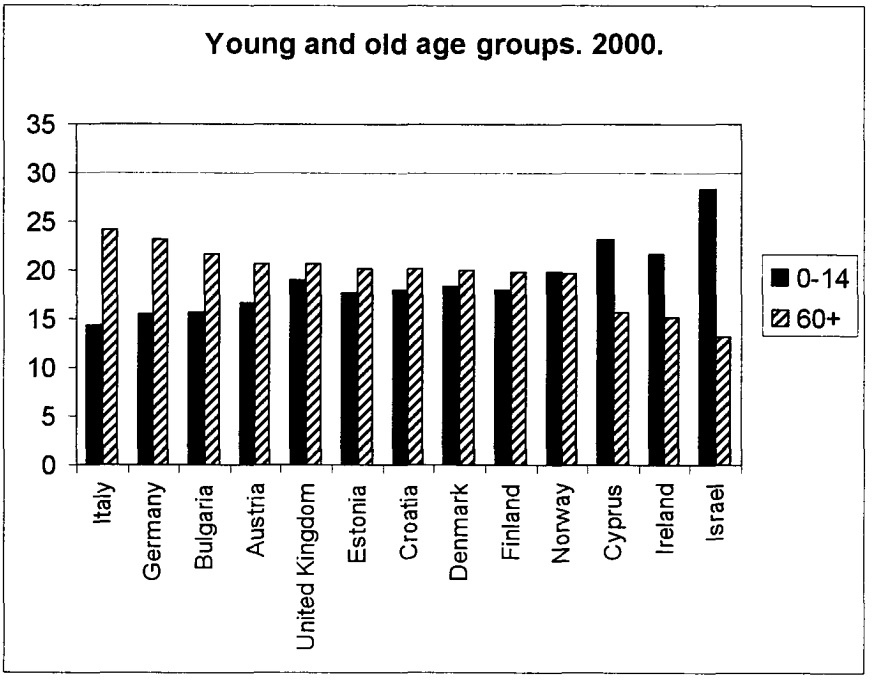
2 The figure is debated since it rests upon some measuring problems such as the exclusion of children women may have born but who have left the household, or the impact of recuperation from postponement of births. Despite debates about the exact level, this is the official figure of childlessness.

Figure 2: Proportion of young and old age groups in populations of COST A19 countries (2000)

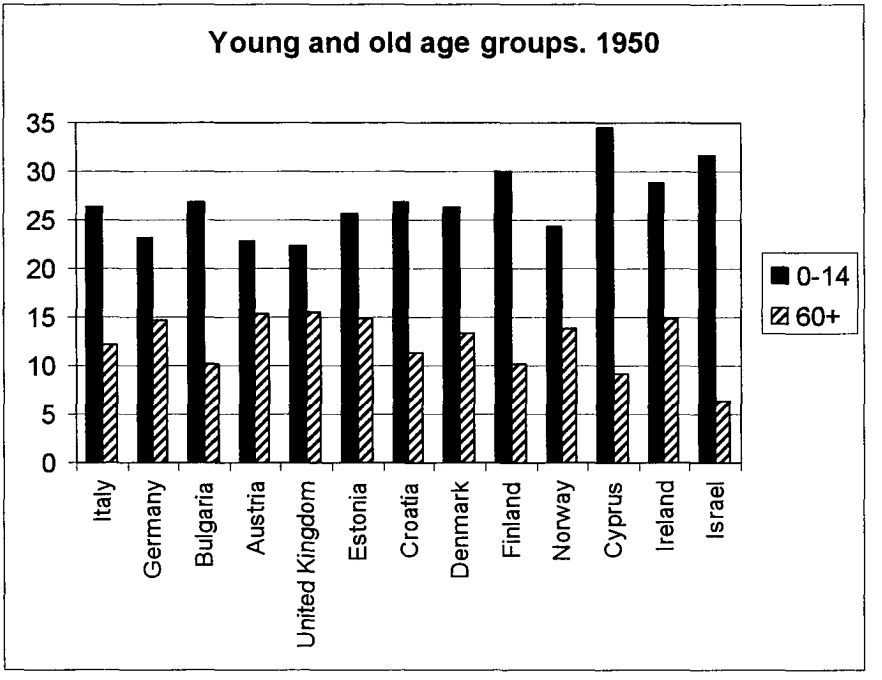


Source: World Population Ageing, UN, 2002

In all countries, except four (Cyprus, Ireland, Israel and Norway, where old and young are about the same), there are now more persons above 60 years than under 15 years (striped bars). We see the clearest shift in Italy and Germany. This is a completely different picture from fifty years ago.

In 1950 children dominated the picture (black bars) and for some countries this shift has been particularly dramatic. In Italy, the country report illustrates this by going back to the beginning of the 1980s, there were less than 60 elderly (65 years and more) per 100 children (14 years or less). Fifteen years later the country inhabits 124 elderly per 100 children (Conti & Sgritta, 2004, p. 275). Bulgaria is a similar case. In 1950 children (0-14 years) constituted 27 per cent of the population, while elderly (60 +) constituted 10 per cent. Fifty years later the situation is about to be turned upside down. Children constituted 16 per cent, and elderly 22 per cent of the population (Raycheva et al., 2004). Israel still has a young population profile (Figure 2). Almost 30 per cent of the population in 2000 were children. Family size is still relatively large. Almost 20 per cent of the families have four children or more (Ben-Arieh et al., 2004). However, the youthfulness was much more pronounced in 1950 (Figure 3) and Israel shares the similar trends of ageing societies as the rest of the countries: falling fertility and rising shares of elderly. The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Norway) have a more balanced development and ageing is less pronounced. But the trend is the same.

Figure 3: Proportion of young and old age groups in populations of COST A19 countries (1950)



Source: World Population Ageing, UN, 2002

Why should ageing societies matter to children's welfare, and in which terms? One hypothesis from the outset of COST A19 was that ageing might involve a higher pressure on the public welfare resources. Expenditure of public welfare resources is under constant observance in most countries and the justification for providing for elderly, who have already contributed to society during a lifetime, may be more obvious than a justification for children who are not (yet) regarded as contributors to the social fabric, but rather as an expense. Increased pressure on public welfare may be balanced by enhanced expectations on children as a private responsibility. Such a trend is traced among the countries and forms the second common piece in the childhood mosaic. The argument that children are a private responsibility is in line with the argument that they have a different position than elderly in terms of access to public resources.

3. Children's market dependency

From many countries an economic "privatisation of childhood"[3]– maybe most prominent in the Italian report – is noted as an emerging, if not a new, feature

3 In non-economic areas, such as in education, it may be argued that children are increasingly under public, or state, control. Hence, contrasting developments in terms of privatization and state-control over childhood can be traced.

of childhood. The focus here is the degree to which children are perceived as a parental, rather than a societal, economic responsibility. Given a parental responsibility, children's welfare depends on the income not solely from one parent, but increasingly from two. In addition to, as will be argued here, the impact of ageing, several forces add to this development: the prominence of work on behalf of family; a greedy labour market in need of workers; state pressuring women to work through reducing welfare support to mothers and children; but also ideological changes such as women's new roles and expectations towards gender equality (access to own money). There are many drivers to enhance parental employment. No matter what are the most important driving forces, across countries children's economic welfare increasingly depends on their parents' employment. An important aspect of the privatization is the expectation that parents should carry the bulk of economic costs of children themselves. Still, there are important variations between countries in the degree to which the state take part in the economic support of children. The country reports indicate that state intervention is an important factor in reducing the risk of child poverty.

The welfare states intervene to modify the direct effects on child poverty and parental incomes. Where children's material welfare is defined as a public responsibility, child poverty is lower even also where family patterns are fragile. This is the case in the Nordic countries, where increasing shares of children grow up in single mother families. By contrast, where children are seen as a private responsibility, more children are poor. This is the case for Italy where family patterns are stable, but the male breadwinner model prevails.

In Italy, the incidence of poverty among minors is higher than all the other age groups. There is at the same time a built in momentum of risk to children's welfare because of the privatization of children's economic welfare. In Italy children are seen as the responsibility of parents. The report states that: *"... the spread of poverty (...) is a sort of perverse effect of family solidarity"* (p. 282), and later: *"Family solidarity (...) becomes a 'multiplier' of poverty"* (p. 300). In this country child poverty has increased – along with the decrease in the child population – while poverty rates among elderly have decreased. At the same time the share of GDP to child related social protection is substantially lower than for other EU countries, while the share used for pensions are substantially higher (p. 304). Italy has among the highest levels of child poverty in Europe.

It has been an aim in the COST Action 19 to approach the issue of economic welfare, not only through poverty rates, but through providing a generational perspective. Are children "richer" or "poorer" than other age groups, for example the elderly? There is no fixed relationship between the role of the state and children's welfare. In particular, to our focus, there seem to be an ongoing change in the poverty risks of children and elderly. Using different approaches several reports find a shift in the generational poverty profile. The German report (Jurczyk et al., 2004) refers to a shift in the generational distribution of poverty:

"... sociological poverty research has been pointing out a shift of poverty risk since the late 1980s, away from the traditional risk groups – such as older people, for example – to children and young people – or specific family arrange-

ments with children – and coined the rather unfortunate term of 'infantilisation of poverty' to refer to the phenomenon." (p. 708)

The measurement of the generational distribution of poverty is complicated matter. In COST Action 19 we have approached the issue through emphasising equivalent scales, such as the OECD-scale. The traditional (old) OECD-scale[4] was more generous in terms of economies of scales than the modified (new) OECD-scale. The confusion that this shift in scales and definitions has caused is easily seen in the Norwegian report (but also in others) (Jensen et al., 2004). In Norway two studies, both carried out by Statistics Norway, demonstrate the impact of this change. The first using the traditional OECD-scale, and the second using the modified scale. The two studies cover different time periods; but one year (1991) is included in both. Using the results from this year only illustrates the impact of shifting from one scale to the other.

Figure 4: Low income by traditional and modified OECD-scales, Norway 1991

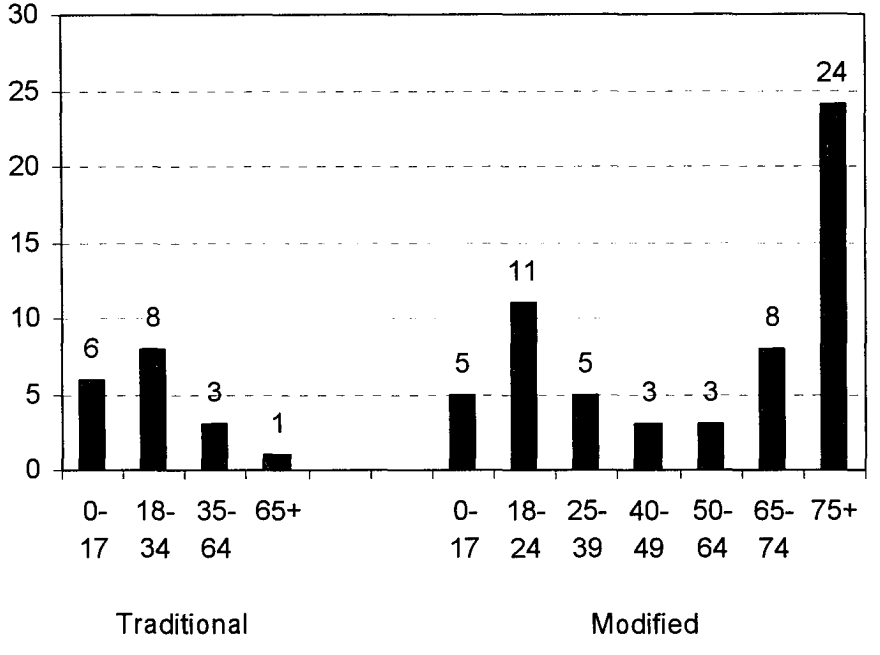


Figure 4 reveals that the changes in measurements do not have a large impact on the poverty incidence among children (six and five per cent respectively). It is the inter-generational comparisons that are influenced. More elderly are defined as poor by the modified OECD-scale. While by the traditional scale only one per cent of old people (65 and more) is counted as poor, by the modified scale eight per cent of those from 65 to 74 years are poor and 24 per cent

4 In the traditional OECD-scale each child was given a weight of 0.5, while one adult had the weight of 1, and the second adult a weight of 0.7. In the modified OECD-scale the weight of a child was lowered to 0.3.

among people older than 74 years. A completely different picture of old age poverty emerges, depending on whether one measurement is used rather than the other.

Several reports discuss impacts on generational poverty by comparing the traditional and modified OECD-scales and draw similar conclusions, among them Austria, Estonia, Finland and Norway. In Cyprus only data from the modified OECD-scales were available. Children face a much lower risk of poverty than other age groups. The Cyprian report draws attention to interpretations of results with reference to the impact of the scale in use (Kouloumou, 2004).

The probability that old people will be counted among the poor has increased due to a shift in scales. What scale mirrors reality, the old or the modified scale of equivalence? A justification of this shift in scales has not been identified. The question if the very definitions of measurement instruments are influenced by the ageing of societies is raised in several reports, but no clear answer is given.

The Austrian report (Beham et al., 2004) finds that a major shift in the generational poverty has taken place along with the modification of the OECD-scales. With the modified OECD-scale old age poverty is higher and childhood poverty lower, however, as stated in the Austrian report:

"... it is (...) unclear to which extent this improvement with a view to child poverty is due to improvement in the monetary transfer system for families with children on the one hand, and to changed measuring instruments (e.g. a flatter equivalent scale) on the other." (p. 31)

Leaving the discussion of measurement instruments aside, we may proceed by searching for the driving mechanisms in producing poverty among children in Europe. In Austria, where childhood poverty in international comparisons is among the lowest, children nevertheless have a higher risk of poverty than adults and old people: 21, 9 and 11 per cent respectively (Beham et al., 2004, p. 30). It is noted a remarkable positive correspondence between the number of children in a household, and poverty. The higher the number of children in a family, the higher is the risk of poverty. Referring to a set of international comparisons the report concludes:

"All relevant studies agree, that the risk of child poverty is predominantly connected with demographic (number of children/lone motherhood) as well as socio-economic (number of incomes in a household) criteria." (p. 36)

Children's economic welfare is heavily dependent on their family structure. The German report concludes that a growing polarisation among children is taking place, with increasing income inequality as an important mechanism:

"Demographic factors such as the type of family (particularly lone parent families and families with many children), the number of unemployed or inactive adults in the household and the educational level of the parents or guardians are decisive for the concrete material situation and/or poverty of households." (p. 711)

Even if we had problems in comparisons across generations, the sources of child poverty was remarkably similar among the countries. Three features are common: the variation in maternal employment; the variation in family structures and the variation of welfare systems. In some countries most mothers are

employed, in others this is less common. The family patterns among European countries vary. In some countries extramarital birth rates are high, in others very low. Likewise the stability of family patterns varies. Some have high levels of instability while in other countries the nuclear family pattern still prevail. Some countries have a higher level of economic support to child families than others do. Levels and magnitude differ. But the characteristics producing child poverty are remarkable similar and can be summarised as:

- being a small child,
- having (more) siblings,
- having a parent at home (partly or full time),
- having parents not living together,
- living with the mother only.

There is a direct link between employment, family structure, welfare system and child poverty. Maternal employment works in tandem with family structures and the welfare system. Both, traditional family structures, such as in Italy, and modern, such as in Nordic countries, may produce child poverty since both cases add to the proportion of children with only one provider. Two employed parents may invest more hours at the labour market than one. Children living in single-parent (mother) families are exposed to poverty, but so are children living in a two-parent family with a single breadwinner. As expressed in the Italian report:

"... neither the employment of at least one of the parents, nor the greater stability of the family and the fact that the proportion of children born out of wedlock is very low – all conditions that would seem to constitute propitious circumstances compared with other countries – protect children and minors effectively against the risk of poverty" (Saraceno, 2002, p. 261 in Conti & Sgritta, 2002, p. 301).

By contrast Norway, with a relatively high proportion of children not living with two parents, does not display increases in childhood poverty. The level is relatively low and stable around three to four per cent. Here poverty is more widespread among elderly than among children. Still, the impact of the welfare state (tax- and income transfers) is more important to old people than to children (Jensen et al., 2004). A common feature in both countries is that more public money is spent on the elderly. But a very important difference is that the state responsibility for preventing children in falling into poverty is stronger in Norway than in Italy.

The most important issue rising from the reports of economic distributions is actually to see how many approaches, concepts and results exist in this area. Everyone can have their own ideas on poverty – it seems.

Poverty is measured through a multitude of ways and the country reports form a rich source of exploring these. The reports illustrate the importance of selecting the measurements. The case of Croatia may serve as an example (Raboteg-Šarić, 2004). In this country no poor persons fall into the category of absolute poverty using the lower US$ 2,15-a-day line as a threshold. Moving to a higher poverty line, but in the European context still very low (US$ 4,30-a-day), about five per cent of the population is considered poor. Shifting from an absolute to a relative poverty line, the poverty rate was between five and 12

per cent, depending on the different measurements as discussed in the report. However, these "objective" measurements all stand in sharp contrast to a subjective approach, as some 80 per cent of Croats consider themselves poor. The two approaches (the objective and the subjective) give a completely different picture and we should ask: which is the most relevant to people? By contrast, reading the Danish report (Kampmann & Nielsen, 2004) the concept of poverty is done away with (as also found in Norway, where 'low income' is the preferred concept). Here poverty is understood – not primarily through the material lack of resources – but as the 'new poverty' which is characterized by weak social networks and/or a complicated and difficult life situation.

In the COST Action we wanted to explore how poverty is perceived and discussed across countries, and not least, we wanted to unveil children's own accounts where available. The country reports represent a rich source on these issues. Several reports refer studies on children's accounts on poverty. One case is the UK-report (Mayhew et al., 2004) where children point to three areas of particular concern: the need to dispose autonomously own financial resources; the need for "appropriate" clothing for peer acceptance; and the need for availability of transport for personal mobility. Being poor in a rich country is not easy, as illustrated by the many quotes by poor children, such as:

"Like when they went down town and they were spending their money, I'd go down town but not spending anything. If you're hanging around with people that are getting quite a lot of things from their parents and you are not, you feel you don't want them to know. That's the last thing you want them to know, and you're kind of like trying to keep it from them." (Amy, 15 years, p. 415)

In Croatia, were evidences for the generational distribution of poverty is mixed, surveys on young people's reaction to being poor is strikingly similar to the description above (Raboteg-Šarić, 2004). Poverty is described as:

"For young people 'poverty is boredom'. Rural youth explained that without money they can't socialize with other young people, they are stuck with their family because of transport costs and because they cannot afford coffee in a café or any other form of entertainment. City youth explained that being poor means no goal, 'only mindless sitting around with friends'." (p. 554)

Unlike historical times when agreements could easily be reached in terms of absolute poverty, present-day researchers are struggling with concepts of relative poverty and the social recognition of what is needed for a good childhood. Perceptions of children's needs, versus other age groups are subjected to public discourses and ongoing redefinitions.

The societal competition between money and children is a major producer of child poverty and is traced for particular groups of children. When ethnic minority children are at high risks of poverty in many countries, this is linked to parental employment in several ways: in ethnic minorities mothers are less likely to be employed and the number of children is higher. Both factors are reducing the number of parental hours at the labour market.

The combined result of maternal employment, family structures and welfare policies on children's economic welfare illustrates the interplay of social structures and child welfare. Maternal employment can at the same time safeguard

and endanger children's economic welfare. It safeguards because two incomes are needed to secure children economically. But it also endangers children's welfare since mothers still adjust their employment to children. Typically children in single parent families live with the mother – and hence are left with the low-income parent. The gender order in society, with low female wage combined with high female parental responsibility, as well as discrimination against ethnic minorities constitutes a structural risk to children's economic welfare.

Our work has confirmed that children's economic welfare depend on: market (parental employment), family structure (lone parent) and fertility (few siblings) and the welfare policies of a country – aspects that may also impact the flavour of childhood (access to parents, living with the father and having siblings). Child-poverty is reduced by not having (several) children and eliminating child poverty goes hand in hand with the ageing society. Parental employment constitutes a critical frame for the child's everyday life: it determines whether and when parents are at home. This guides me to the third common piece in the childhood mosaic: the virtual child.

4. Troubled public spaces and the virtual child

Across countries we learn than children spend less time outside the home and more time in front of TV's and computers. Children are increasingly taken to school in the family car, even when the distance is rather short. The 'wild space' is being tamed (Italy), or the time-in-between where children are not reached by the parent nor the teacher – (Germany) – is taken away. Children do not walk to school together with their schoolmates and outside the parental gaze. Many factors contribute to this development (Denmark):

- increased car disposal,
- closure of local primary schools,
- a lower age when children start school,
- changes in parents attitudes and perceptions.

Children's walking and playing outside the parental gaze become more unusual. Several reports testify to the development. In Denmark (Kampman & Nielsen, 2004) and Norway (Jensen et al., 2004), where children's "free play" and the ability to move freely outdoor loom large in adults' value perceptions of childhood, children are now driven to the school. Parental concerns about safety on the roads to school are widespread and a piece of the childhood mosaic. But other concerns are also observed, including "adult hostility" (noted in Ireland and UK) (Devine et al., 2004; Mayhew et al., 2004). In Finland, a public debate on the need for children of being together with "safe adults" points to the outside world as a dangerous place (Alanen et al., 2004). At the same time children's most urgent wish – as notified in Austria – are spaces that are not defined, organized or controlled by adults (Beham et al., 2004). The situation of Bulgarian children is described as particularly disturbing. In the course of the transition, or, as stated in the report, the chaotic transformation of structures and the drive for quick material prosperity, a substantial share of the urban areas has been converted into blocks of flats, shops, or parking lots. Such spaces used to be available for children and youngsters for playing games and entertainment. These are now adult spaces (Raycheva et al., 2004). In Croatia parents have organized demonstrations to save public playgrounds used for play, sport or socializing from being taken

over by further building construction (Raboteg-Šarić, 2004). A conflict over public spaces is not particular for transitional countries. In the UK initiatives such as the "Make Space" campaign, try to rise public awareness to the needs of children and youngsters to access public spaces (Mayhew et al., 2004).

Parental concerns about safety on the roads to school are widespread and a common feature of the country reports. But other concerns are also noted, including "adult hostility". Children's collective need in the public spaces is an issue deserving more attention in childhood research. It is a common feature – mentioned in about all country reports – that public schools are neglected. Reports complain that building constructions are in a bad shape, that indoor-conditions (air) are poor; that more pupils are put into fewer classes and that the distance to schools are increasing due to centralization. The deterioration of public school buildings may indicate that money is saved over the public purse. We do not know if children's institutions (schools) are more subjected to money saving than old age institutions. No country has been able to provide such information. But there is a general observation that children's 'working conditions' (at school) seem to be deteriorating also in countries with strong national economy (Norway is one case).

In a multitude of ways children's everyday life is constructed through common forces. For example parental employment influences children's everyday life: economically, spatially and in scheduling their time. From a child's point of view, there may be a conflict between their dependency on two parental incomes and their access to time with parents. A particular problem arises with the increasing flexibilization of the labour market, as described in the German report (Jurczyk et al., 2004). While parents may find flexible and irregular working hours a solution to the "care gap" (identified in many countries) or to their own needs of combining work and family, children suffer from not knowing when parents return home. Children – in this case eight to ten-years old – are unable to make their own plans due to uncertainties in parent's work schedules. Many children are allowed to play outside only while a parent is at home. Hence, they have long periods of waiting inside the home until a parent gets back from work. A desirable care situation is, as these children see it is: when the arrangement is clear, reliable, a parent can be reached with certainty, when parents are relaxed and not in a hurry when being together, no waiting periods for the child, and time shared with parents as well as time spent alone.

Children appreciate family time and they seldom complain on parental employment, the Austrian report informs (Beham et al., 2004). They understand parents need for bringing money home. Several reports include children's evaluations on time with parents and a – maybe surprising – aspect is that complaints over too much time with the parents are more often reported than lack of time. Children do not wish unlimited time together with their parents. In several country reports (for example Austria, Germany and Ireland) children experience a need of time on their own, and parent's involvement as too extensive! Parents occupy too much of children's time. Children want access to parents when needed but they also want 'adult-free' time.

While children are less outside houses, their expanding use of media is a common feature. Most reports note a growing tendency for children to have TV or

computer in their own room, and to spend increasing time in front of a screen. There is a link between parental restrictions of the outside areas and children's media use (Italy). A question asked is how children accept being "locked" inside the home? The suggested answer is that the virtual space transforms the home into a "golden prison". Children are kept inside the four walls but not by an external power and not contrary to their own wishes. Rather they are seduced into the "honey trap" through the access to the virtual space. Bulgarian children may serve as an example. They spend on the average three hours a day watching television. The report explains that due to parents' work schedule children spend a big part of the day alone at home, which makes them free to watch whatever they want. A typical paradox, as observed, is a large quantitative supply, reduced quality, a lack of variety and a limited choice in what to watch. Few national television programmes for children are produced and imported film production (American as a rule, mostly cartoons) prevails (Raycheva et al., 2004). Parents see their children as more safe inside the home, than outside. Gradually, however, risks also penetrate the home. In front of computers children are exposed to paedophiles, sex and violence often away from the parental control.

Children's use of the media is not without concern and tensions. In some countries (Ireland is one case) parents are named "play police", trying to protect children's access to certain types of programmes and their overall screen-time (Devine et al., 2004). Family time is elevated as the most important issue, for example in family policy, see discussion in the case of Norway (Jensen et al., 2004) while children themselves feel colonized by their parent's desires.

Several reports argue that playgrounds, family weekends in front of the TV, and a lack of local, non-commercial areas 'off-street' contribute a feeling of boredom among children and young people. Such arguments are discussed particularly for Austria (Beham et al., 2004), Ireland (Devine et al., 2004) and the UK (Mayhew et al., 2004). In the same vein, most children's activities, says the German report, are eventually located "in houses or at places fenced by walls and hedges" and where "children's agency is controlled by the structural power of spatial borderlines and the size of places." (Jurczyk et al., 2004, p. 752). Children's access to public space conflicts with the needs of adult society. This conflict is, says the Italian report, rescued by children's access to the virtual space (Conti & Sgritta, 2004).

The "virtual child" is a third piece of the childhood mosaic, but it is also a piece where the national colouring of children's everyday life has been exceptionally strong.

5. Discourses on childhood

Are perceptions on children's needs coloured by increased pressures of an ageing society? We tried to identify changes in the cultural climate between generations especially outside the family realm. We have seen that children are vulnerable in material terms; children's dependence on two parental incomes is increasing; and they are increasingly segregated from adults' life worlds through a spatial location driving them inside the homes (and into age segregated institutions of kindergartens and schools). Can we, by any reasonable justification, claim that these trends are linked to an ageing society?

The links between children's welfare and ageing societies can be direct, but will operate in most cases through a host of broad societal changes, such as globalization and the flexibilization of the labour market. The impact on children's welfare is not linear as it may be illustrated in the case of maternal employment. Working mothers have enhanced the family income, but may undermine at the same time perceptions of children's economic needs from the public purse. The pressure from ageing societies may have consequences on children's claims (or rights) on welfare support. While elderly are economically supported over the welfare budget, the economic provision for children is overwhelmingly private. Children and elderly both are so called "dependent groups", but the political legitimacy to give priority to public transfers of money to children seems weak. On the one hand, statistics identify elderly, not children, as the needy group (see discussion on the equivalent scales). On the other hand, the elderly population is growing. They will not only be more in need, but also a larger group of the electorate.

Most European children are also growing up in countries where in general old people's memories of their own childhood was one of deep cutting lacks of prosperity, and often widespread poverty. While child poverty is perceived as a shame, the perceived wealth of child-families is also regarded as destructive to children. Changes in material welfare over generations and demanding expectations for consumer goods among the younger generations are explored in the Cyprian Report (Kouloumou, 2004). According to public discourses in many countries children have too much and demand too much. They watch too much TV, move too little and become too fat. Parents, eager to fulfil their children's wishes, are blamed in the media but also by themselves for spoiling their children. The spatial segregation of children combined with the increased consumption possibilities (and demands) in well-off families may further undermine perceptions of children as a public responsibility.

With ageing societies the needs of the elderly population, maybe along with growing cultural divide between generations, gain importance in public debates. As larger segments of the population have none, or little, direct interaction with children in everyday life, the social and cultural considerations of children's needs may weaken. From this perspective we may ask whether the sharp increase in old people, and the rising number of childless adults may interact with the cultural perceptions of children: an overly sentimentalized valuation of own babies, in combination with adult hostility towards other people's kids. In Europe children grow up in a society where – as stated in the German report – ever fewer adults choose a life with children (Jurczyk et al., 2004). We may ask if, and how, a widening gap between people living with children and those without may affect children's welfare. One possibility is that a growing segment of adult population remaining childless may impact the collective consciousness of children as common goods. More adults without own children may nurture 'child-free movements', a phenomena of widespread reach.

Will ageing influence perceptions of childhood in other ways? The German report (Jurczyk et al., 2004) argues that ageing may impact the time of children and young people in the educational system. The scarcity of children is sought to be solved through increased pressure on the efficiency of children's accumulation of human capital. It is noted that concepts of the playing child

and the learning child are increasingly conflicting and the pressure from economy seems to become more crucial. When results from the PISA-studies send chock-waves through a society, it is the fear of children as future providers that is at stake. Several drivers are at work to maximize efficiency in children's education such as earlier start in schooling. For example features as intensification of the learning process, shortening the time in education, life long learning, are seen in many countries but are seldom linked to the ageing of society.[5]

A larger share of the population does not live with children in their daily lives. Children are increasingly kept inside – in institutions or at home – secluded from society outside the family realm. The widening gap between children and adults may influence the degree to which other generational groups have first hand knowledge and understanding of children's needs.

While (almost all) country reports state the development towards an ageing society, the reports also reveals that much is left in order to understand whether and how this development may impact childhood. To a large degree the consequences of ageing on childhood is an under-explored field. Our work can not point at ageing as the most crucial underlying factor changing European childhood. This was never our ambition, and could not be so. Maybe ageing has common features with environmental changes – you may suspect that a shift in the Golf-stream has substantial implications – but it is difficult to point to the here-and-now issues followed by this suspicion. The change is broad, difficult to trace in everyday life and for many of us – hypothetical. The importance, however, may stem from posing the question. We can see that something is emerging. But we do not know how to deal with it. Ageing societies may cause changes in childhood conditions, but may also be a result of such changes.

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5 Since the publication of the country reports the need to speed up young people's time in the educational system has intensified. Very seldom this trend (linked to the Bologna-process) is associated with the emerging need to make young people ready for the labour market in times with less lea-way for tolerating young people's year-long searching to fulfil personal needs.

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Prof. Dr. An-Magritt Jensen, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norwegen, E-Mail: anmagritt.jensen@SVT.NTNU.NO

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